



Our Mission. Your Safety. Your Mobility. Your Economic Opportunity.

Idaho Transportation Department

Today's News Briefs

Source: Helena (Mont.) Independent Record

Author:

2/25/2013

(Montana) Opinion: TSA needs to work closer with airport

Opinion: Helena Independent Record

HELENA, Mont. - The effort this week by the U.S. Transportation Safety Administration to try and remove the new millimeter-wave scanners at the Helena Regional Airport has sparked a stand off of sorts between the airport and the agency.

The scanners were installed last April and the airport spent \$125,000 in renovations to make them fit. And the scanners have worked great, said Ron Mercer, Helena Regional Airport manger. Lines at security checkpoints have decreased substantially and the new scanners are less intrusive.

Unlike the other full-body scanners that made national headlines because they produced a near-nude image of the passenger being scanned, the millimeter-wave scanners create a cartoon like image that picks up anything that is in a passenger's pockets, from bubble gum wrappers to a plastic weapon.

But since the other scanners created such a controversy, last year Congress ordered TSA to remove them at the nation's major airports by June 1. The agency was unable to have the controversial scanners modified, so this month they started moving the millimeter-wave scanners, which are mostly at smaller airports, to the larger facilities.

The agency proposes to replace the millimeter-wave scanners with the old walk-through metal detectors. But Mercer isn't happy about the change.

The TSA had several months to work with airports and figure out a solution, but that's not what happened. Instead, they got word to Mercer last week via local TSA employees and told him they were on their way to get the scanners. He sent a letter to TSA officials and told them they couldn't take the scanners. Pointing to Montana law, he contends the scanners are a fixture in the airport and the agency can't remove it until they get the blessing of the airport.

Airport security is important to the Helena Regional Airport and its customers. TSA's primary job is to provide security at the airport and doing that job well means having a healthy working relationship with the airport staff and leadership.

Mercer is quick to point out that local TSA managers and staff are great to work with.

The TSA has had plenty of time to work toward a satisfactory solution to their security scanner problem. And yet, they never made an attempt to include Mercer and the airport in this process. That's not how an effective partnership works and we demand better from the federal agency tasked with keeping our airlines secure.

As of Friday, the scanner removal was in limbo. What TSA should do is focus their efforts on finding a solution for their controversial scanners at the larger airports, rather than waste money trotting around to the country's small airports and taking away their scanners.

On Wednesday, TSA said, via an email, that the scanner removal shouldn't cause any delays, but Mercer said that isn't true. Moving back to the old metal detectors will lead to more pat-downs and other measures to insure flights are safe. This will mean longer wait times for travelers.

"My job is to make sure we have the best possible facility and best possible security for our folks here," Mercer said. "We have the best possible right now and I don't want to lose it."

In the end, Mercer may not be able to keep the TSA from removing the millimeter-wave scanner, but we hope the agency makes a much greater effort than it has thus far in working with Mercer and providing effective and timely security systems at our airport.